Volume 11 | Number 1 Article 3

6-1983

Big Singing: One Hundred Years Young

BIG SINGING: ONE HUNDRED YEARS YOUNG

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To most of us, any thing or any one approaching one hundred years of age is considered to be rather old. However, Benton's Big Singing, which observed its one-hundredth annual assembly Sunday, May 22, is a young centenarian. It is young in spirit and outlook but at the same time far older than a century in its musical attributes.

The Big Singing was begun in 1884 by James R. Lemon with the assistance of several others, notably his brother George W. Lemon. With the exception of a few times early in its existence, the Big Singing has been consistently in Benton. Although early meetings met in several locations, the Marshall County Courthouse has been the locale for the Big Singing since about World War I.

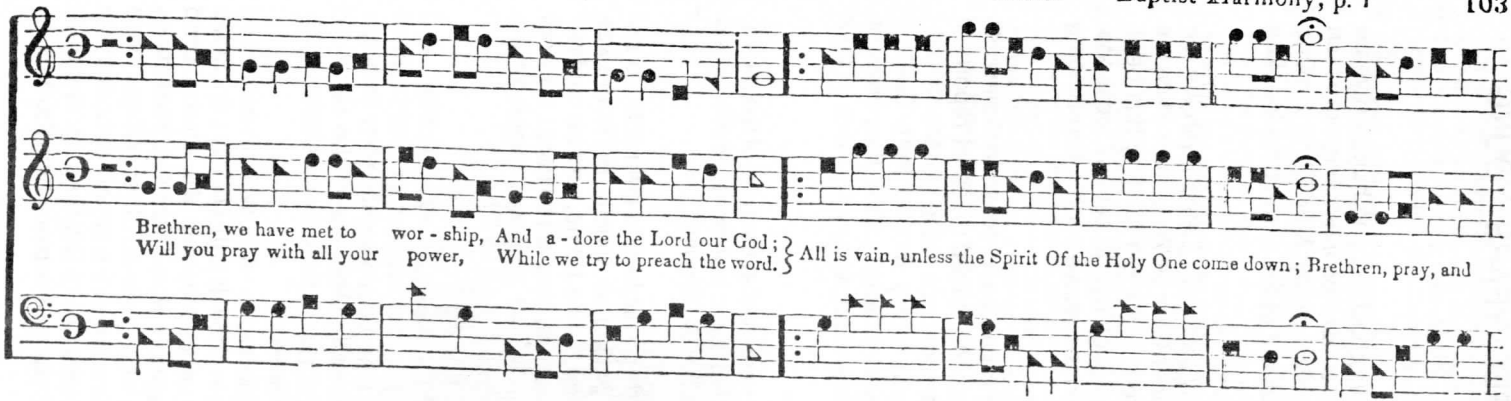
The musical source of the Big Singing has been consistent since its inception. William Walker's *Southern Harmony,* based on sales reports of over 600,000 copies, was the most popular tunebook in the nineteenth century. Tradition says that when the Lemon family moved from Guilford County, North Carolina, to Marshall County, Kentucky in 1852, they brought at least one treasured copy of the *Southern Harmony* with them in their covered wagon.

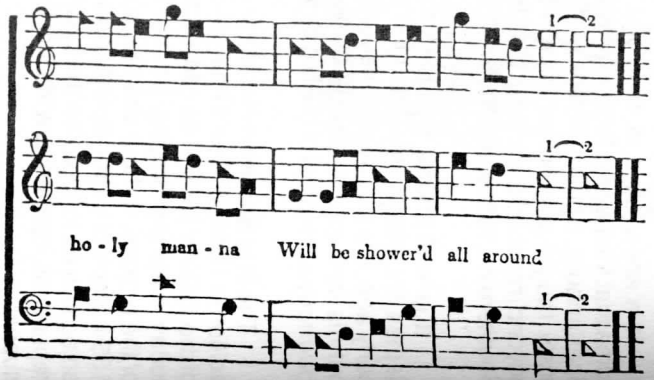
For James Lemon, who was just four years old at the time of the move, it was only normal to utilize the ubiquitous *Southern Harmony,* which he had known all his life, as the source of music for the Big Singing.

It is speculative at this point, but both possible and plausible, to assume that the Lemon family knew William Walker personally. His home was Spartanburg, South Carolina, not too far from their home, and he continuously taught singing schools in the Carolinas and elsewhere. It is not beyond reason to venture that the Lemons had acquired copies of the *Southern Harmony* at a Walker singing school.

It is well known that the Lemon family was a "singing family," and James, the oldest child, became a singing school teacher, or master, at an early age. It is said that he devotedly used the *Southern Harmony* throughout his long and illustrious career. He continued his use of the *Southern Harmony* at the start of the Big Singing, and it is still the only musical source.

The first *Southern Harmony* was published in 1835, with an expanded edition in 1844. Walker's final edition was in 1854. It is this edition, or copies of the 1939 or 1966 photographically reproduced reprints of it, which is used today in the Big Singing. Both of these reprints were faithful reproductions of the original, without change, and there have been no other editions since 1854. Each of these reprints came at a time when the supply of books was so scarce as to threaten the continued existence of Big Singing, and each reprint has injected new life into the Big Singing by replenishing the musical supply.





2 Brethren, see poor sinners round you,
Trembling on the brink of wo;
Death is coming, hell is moving;
Can you bear to let them go?
See our fathers—see our mothers,
And our children sinking down;
Brethren, pray, and holy manna
Will be shower'd all around.

3 Sisters, will you join and help us?
Moses' sisters aided him;
Will you help the trembling mourners,
Who are struggling hard with sin?
Tell them all about the Saviour,
Tell them that he will be found;
Sisters, pray, and holy manna
Will be shower'd all around.

4 Is there here a trembling jailer,
Seeking grace, and fill'd with fears
Is there here a weeping Mary,
Pouring forth a flood of tears?
Brethren, join your cries to help them
Sisters, let your prayers abound;
Pray, O! pray, that holy manna
May be scatter'd all around.

5 Let us love our God supremely,
Let us love each other too;
Let us love and pray for sinners,
Till our God makes all things new
Then he'll call us home to heaven,
At his table we'll sit down.
Christ will gird himself, and serve us
With sweet manna all around.

This is the traditional opening song at Big Singing.

There are several things which make Big Singing unique. First, of course, is that it seems to be the only remaining consistent use of the *Southern Harmony.* This, in turn, contributes several factors to this uniqueness.

As we noted, the final codification and definitive edition of the *Southern Harmony* by Walker was in 1854. Consequently, it retained its purity through the period when similar works, notably the *Sacred Harp,* were being "modernized," "corrected," or "up-dated." These all are euphemisms for discarding what any current editor dislikes—or cannot comprehend—and replacing, modifying, or adapting the contents to his taste, which, parenthetically, always seems to be at the basest level of musicianship.

By being spared such desecration, the *Southern Harmony* kept intact several things. Primary among these is the indigenous musical idiom, frequently called a folk idiom by modern scholars. The late Dr. George P. Jackson wrote a strong case—strengthened by the passage of time—for the "folk" origins of much of the music in the *Southern Harmony.* In evidence, such music should have ancient attributes, such as modality (neither true major nor minor keys), open chord structures (no thirds in many chords, just roots and fifths, especially in cadences), melodic concepts in each voice line rather than having one melody with harmonic accompaniments (a vestige of the polyphonic part writing of the Renaissance), and frequent variety in the textual poetic meter and the accompanying music (as opposed to later conformist tendencies toward Common Meter).

Still other musical characteristics attesting antiquity are the part-writing (generally three parts, rather than four) and the voice leadings, especially in the fuge-tunes (points of imitation used in successive voice entries). All of these characteristics may be found in the music of the *Southern Harmony.*

Still another attestation of age is the form of solmization used in singing from the *Southern Harmony.* The ascending scale is sung "fa, sol, la, fa, sol, la, mi, fa," which derives from the hexachord of medieval musical theory and was codified into these very syllables by Guido d'Arezzo about A.D. 1000.

Another characteristic of age, although considerably younger than the solmization, is the musical notation. Known today as "fasola" notation, it originally was a patented process for musical notation developed around 1800 by John Connelley, an otherwise obscure Philadelphia printer. Instead of today's standard "round" note head, fasola uses four geometric shapes for note heads. They are the right triangle for **fa** (first and fourth degrees of the scale), a circle for **sol** (second and fifth degrees), a square for **la** (third and sixth degrees), and a diamond for **mi** (the seventh degree or leading tone). This notation was first used in a tunebook named *The Easy Instructor,* the name emphasizing the ease of learning to read music with the new notation.

At least one other characteristic testifies in behalf of age. That is the performance practice of the Big Singing. Although there have been slight modifications in recent years, the "old-timers" still cling to performance

practices of their forebears. These include such things as tempos, which seem to be determined on the bases of the ancient teachings that meter signatures convey tempo concepts also. Another traditional "folk" practice is the frequent performance of both the third and seventh of the scale, regardless of actual notation, in an amorphous, ambiguous manner, neither quite major nor minor. Of course, this practice antedates the so-called "blues" performance of popular music, and in all probability is the origin of the "blues notes."

This music sounds different. To modern ears, accustomed to the incessant cacophony of noise—mistakenly called music—which bombards all of us, music of the *Southern Harmony* suggests an oasis of tranquillity, even in the full fervor of its sound. For it is a vibrant, living, dynamic music. Admittedly, the taste for it must be developed, but this is true with many things, whether arts or victuals.

This is music to be sung, enjoyed, participated in, to be surrounded by, and not just to hear, although that alone can be a delightful experience. With but little imagination, one can read accounts of singing in eighteenth-century America and apply the descriptions to the Big Singing. There are apparently no other current singings which have retained this purity of traditional performance.

This is especially true of other fasola singings, which have performance practices traceable only to the World War I era of the Sankey-Rodeheaver-Billy Sunday "foot-stomping," extremely fast music. Some of these other singings using books printed in fasola notation have even corrupted the very essence and *raison d'etre* of fasola by singing seven syllables (do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti, do) instead of the authentic and correct four syllables (fa, sol, la, fa, sol, la, mi, fa).

Fortunately, the performance practices of Big Singing in its music and its texts have remained amazingly pure. For example, the few texts that are the most recent date only to c. 1850, while others range all the way back to the mid-sixteenth century.

When all these things are assembled, they come together in only one place, and that's the annual Big Singing in Benton, Kentucky, the fourth Sunday in May. We can account for the antiquity and consequent purity of music and text by there having been no *Southern Harmony* editions after 1854, except for the recent photographic reproductions which made no alterations in either music or text.

However, to explain the purity of performance practices, we must consider other items. Benton is in an eight county peninsula of Kentucky which is bounded by four great rivers of the nation: the Mississippi on the west, the Ohio on the north, and the Tennessee and Cumberland on the east. While these proved a boon to migrants choosing to live in this area, and while they also were essential corridors of all types of commerce in the westward expansion of the nation, they were a formidable barrier to the outsider, especially as no bridges spanned them until nearly the middle of this century.

This geographical isolation, coupled with the long-lasting cultural isolation imposed upon the South during the Civil War and Reconstruction, plus pioneer fortitude and the inbreeding of a proud and fiercely independent people, all have contributed to a purity of traditional performance unmatched in this nation.

Taken all together, these factors combine to make the Big Singing the oldest indigenous musical tradition in the country.

And, of course, Big Singing has been so honored. In 1973, some fifty participants performed *Southern Harmony* music on the Mall in the District of Columbia as a feature of the Folklife Festival of the Smithsonian. A reception at the White House was capped by a presentation of *Southern Harmony* copies to President Nixon and the White House library.

Further recognition came to the Big Singing during the 1976 celebration of the Bicentennial. It was one of less than one hundred musically oriented or related entites to be honored with an official bronze Bicentennial Plaque. This is mounted in the Marshall County Court House.

And then this year, there is the Resolution of the Kentucky Association of College Music Departments. This is the first time that such an honor has been awarded the Big Singing.

So, briefly, that's the summation of Benton's Big Singing. Born from the love of J.R. Lemon and others for the music of William Walker's *Southern Harmony;* nurtured through one hundred annual singings by those who still love and care for the music and the fellowship; and looking forward to its second century with renewed vigor through the transfusions of new books, younger performers, a commercial recording, and an optimistic outlook, encouraged by the recent formation of the Society for the Preservation of *Southern Harmony* Singing, Incorporated.

That's the Big Singing: one hundred years young and still growing. America's Oldest Indigenous Musical Tradition, looking not just at its recent one hundredth gathering, but beyond to its second century.

Marygold Wine

To every gallon of water put three pounds of lump sugar, let it boil an hour, when cold, put in it a toast dipped in strong yeast, add to every gallon two quarts of fresh gathered Marygold flowers, the juice of three lemons, and the peel of one, but all into the vessel together, stir it well every day for a fortnight. Then stop it down — if this wine is made in October it will stand four months before it is ready for bottling but if made sooner in the season it may be bottled in six or eight weeks.